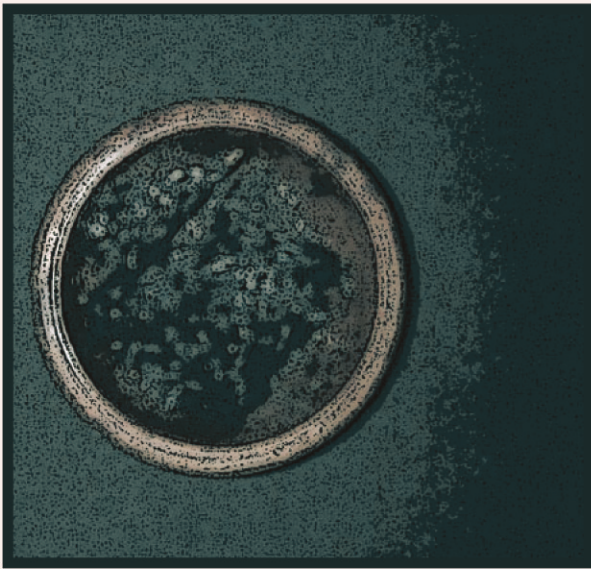


A TIME FOR ASHES



Gail D Whitter

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I would like to acknowledge the strong women who have inspired me to bring this manuscript out of the closet & into life:

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2011

for my Mom, Gladys

1915-1980

*because true gifts
are always remembered*



unlike even
you are
not alone

PREFACE

What this manuscript tells us is that there is a story behind every death by cancer; that there is a real person with important things to say about her life - as a patient, her medical care and about being a woman within that context. It is also about noticing and being eternally grateful for the tender loving care of her daughter and knowing, knowing she can do nothing to ease her loss, or to stop her own leaving. It is also about setting the record straight before she leaves. This is a very powerful book, a very important book because it is breaking one more of the silences, the silence that women do not drop weakly into the hereafter, but more often than not, take care of business, say what they need to say to those they most love and then walk bravely into the void; that they cope first with incredible pain and the ugliness of this horrendous disease and are often fed up and angry with the platitudes of their medical caregivers and wish only for honesty and straight talk.

It also says that family members only become more of what they have always been. The weak stay weak and betray and fail to change even to the end, do not say goodbye or help in their loved-one's care, while the strong and the true are exactly that, even to changing dressings and standing watch until the final hour. And then finally, it is about how that love carries on; how even death does not end it, and we each in our own way have to find the exorcism we require to come to terms with it.

- M.B.

falling from her book
so small a sunflower
listen to its song ...

Backlash always a threat to women

LYNN BULMAHN
New York Times News Service

Push for rights
is interpreted as
backlash

ARE WOMEN WHO want to get ahead in the world experiencing a backlash in which men do not want them? Signs

Carrot cocktails and white knight cited by survivors of breast cancer

possible as she struggles with her morphine waiting for advice

ADVICE
SOME
ACTION

"These people seem willing to openly defy society's rules and then turn around and willingly receive handouts," said Dal-

The killer won't quit

You can't argue with that and, in fact, if more communities could learn to work and share their joys and sorrows this way, the world might be a less lonely and troubled place.

CANCER

Continued from C1
against breast cancer

are turning to tactics of confrontation

women
how do we honour

Jones' group — Breast Cancer Action — mounted a massive letter-writing campaign this fall that flooded Ottawa with about 10,000 missives. MPs were urged to pressure Bonchard to fully implement the Unanswered Questions' recommendations.

In a recent press release, Breast Cancer Action defines its mandate: "Our politicians, our research and medical communities must understand that the time has come to make breast cancer a national priority. . . . There is

no prevention, no known cause and the treatments currently being offered fail thousands of patients every year. The time for ACTION is NOW."

To give its goal visual wallop, the group created a "symbol" for breast cancer — a pink and a black ribbon worn in a teardrop shape, the pink representing the 15,000 Canadians diagnosed with breast cancer annually, and the black representing the

Please see **CANCER, C2**

On your own

W their breasts. Increasingly, their fears of Canada's number one killer of women 35 to 54 are being transformed into anger.

Manji finds a sense of community and a desire to belong, sometimes in the most unlikely places. And she's unafraid to challenge orthodoxies or institutions. She even takes on the news media, believing it's guilty of trivializing

"She is fearful of ever being a burden to anyone. She hasn't been accustomed in her life to thinking about what she might need or want. Now that I've put

events and feelings will inspire the bold and frighten the squeamish. . . . suspected of killing the woman, saving up her body and

Some women have le breasts. A good nursing should be mildly upset but NOT painful, and it few seconds.

FAKING
AIM:

IT BEGINS IN THE EGG

illegitimate
this subterranean crab
engendering itself
sculpting all
that it touches
to take on its own

sucking your warm breath
sensuous breast
crevices
disordering your senses
cell upon cell
until you wear
its molecular structure
like a badge

& after
begins the well-tried
cancer-can-be
beaten propaganda -
its unrelenting fury
of stats & facts
interferes in your affairs
like a verb

nowhere does it
describe the pain ...

AMAZON QUEEN

you grip your chest
- the left breast
tied where it was torn
sutures warm
catacombed under
narcotic gag
& outer wrappings
protrusive like
the hair of medusa

THE PAVILION

where suffering
is not personal
where behind every door
is a pallid face
an insecure smile
reminiscent of sour-
walled auschwitz

a monochromatic
government-funded
sahara of women
concealed like ancestral sins
by earthbound godlings
& incestuous machines
slow to the kill

while you & i know
other women's skulls
ribs & vertebrae
vibrate still in open graves
- their protruding arms
raised in protest
exposing the private agonies
& other fits of madness
we all live within

WITHOUT WARNING

i remember
the sacrifice
when you told me

*death no longer
has to be looked for ...*

CAUTIOUS

you - different
from the others
because you write so well
or make me laugh

i have no hardness sometimes

& sometimes
i become small, inexpensive
in some closed chrysalis
some unclassified space
that only you provide

& sometimes
i say all the right words
unlearn to breathe
& do not move

for fear



MEMES

soft as pigeon wing
this flesh-toned oval
lumped in its
immeasurably
empty cup

unbalanced

nipple-less
this silicone cast-off
tit-prop
heat-resistant
shock-absorbent
i hold

holding my own
erect breast
its nipple hard
& round between
two probing fingers
like a small pink bead
a small pink o

- imagine the rest

A PART OF THE WHOLE

once upon a time
we were the same
you & i
our shadows sometimes
crossing over
sharing the same appetite
for italian food
late, late movies
& a perfect truth
our womanbones
alive with the same
rich, red wise-blood
my gestures
speech
& solemn pose
exactly like yours
quick to embrace
people, trees
stars
& a certain hostility
- bored easily with fools
& sometimes men

together we shared the
same ritualistic behaviours
respect for beauty
& fear's sharp snake
there were no impossibilities
no hollow victories
no stone unturned
& in our strength
asked little or nothing

NO UNIVERSE IS BIGGER

she may have only one
but it's a handful
says the husband

THE CLINIC

In Her Own Words

wasting precious energies
i am like a child again
cradled in this sterile cubicle
where the only decision
one can make
is that they are here
among the whitecoats
with their slick smiles
grey flannel hair
striped silk ties
& leather shoes
sidestepping
the endless corridors
& covering their ignorance
with silver-plated switchblades
& rumours of things to come

a tribe of crows

even in death
they prosper

SPINNER

eight horny little hands
hauling & pulling
twisting & winding
weaving & unweaving
an endless meditation
like a woman
through the arms
& legs of her lover -
reminiscent of the silken
umbilical cords of childhood
cat's cradle
owl's eyes
witch's broom
suggestively defensive
loosened, yet never undone -
built to elude the fevers
& phantoms
& now scattered with raw
broken feasts
i imagine her soft web
wrapped round my body
across the breasts
around the hips
while she gently walks
the endless labyrinth
east to west
north to south

only you
acknowledge the power
of her powerlessness

ALMOST KIND

even the crows
had thick tongues
& didn't say a word

didn't say how the
angry red moon
hung like a hang man's head

or the rose
[almost the same]
leaned her bony limbs
against the pane

pointing in

there were no prayers
no trace of wind

only this last patch of snow
in the shape of a turtle

going home

RANSOMED

i got you back -
pushing aside
the medical refuse
& powerlessness

I got you back -
packed your
winter clothes
& prepared this
room to shelter you
in warmer nights
& children's laughter

i got you back -

& with pretended ease
gave death a place

MIRROR MIRROR

under the sudden flood
of fluorescent light
you faced yourself
as one would face another
exposing the lost bride
dispassionate womanwitch
holy crone
the thorn of your breast
reflecting all women before
all women after

it was then
you cast off your name
& stopped using eyes
to see

THE SILENCE THAT HAS NO NAME

the silence in which we move
- whenever we move
shifts it's great weight
another inch
inching into niches

between before & after

the silence in which we move
caught in the crossfire of
half-talk & rationed days
leaves us unable
to find the old paths

the silence in which we move
uncommon -
wherein every thought
comes too close
conspiring with us
to betray each other -
spare ourselves

... even now

or, as one member of the audience put it in a question to Peto: "What do I do if the treatments are so bad, I'd rather die?"

Many doctors scoff at treating breast cancer with carrot juice, mega-doses of vitamin C or imagining white knights riding away with the diseased cells.

is a relief for all of us to know we aren't working alone any more.

I did juice therapy while I was having chemotherapy," she says. "The doctor couldn't figure out what wasn't as sick as I was." She's convinced those vitamins, radical

y and I feel all these things sor
rked together. You cannot j
at the body, you have to treat
ole person."

1,000 women under 50 having their first mammogram, 53 will have had an abnormal finding resulting in diagnostic procedures, including biopsies. These will result in the finding of two cancers, one that is high grade and one that is low grade and invasive.

When the Regina resident diagnosed in 1994 at the age of 54 with breast cancer and in 1996 given six months to live, she decided to do everything to prolong her life.

who survive: works treat whole can

death, a tumour that demands to

Our data indicate there are a lot of false positives with mammography. You have to consider the anxiety of having that (false positive) and the procedures that go along with it," she says.

Least cancer risks remain

Making the most of death

For 1,000 women 50 and older
dergoing their first mammo-

● The establishment of a national network of breast cancer survivorship centers to help women with the disease find the best care for their condition. And she will cost.

● More money and greater cancer survival priorities are Canada's special year on direct research, compared to the U.S.

● The establishment of a national clearinghouse for information on breast cancer, so people can get accurate and consistent data they can rely on.

risk of actually having cancer is incredibly small, once you have that

will have an abnormal finding resulting in 132 additional pro-

As a nation, we have a problem with any

research
of breast
research
quick said
rson pe
r cancer
out \$8 in

INSIGHT

¹⁰ The authors thank J. S. Hwang for his help in the early stage of this work.

breast cancer

JUNKIE

every four hours
these spear points
of sweet morphia
hermetically seal you off

you who survived
twisted bowels
scarlet fever
& cheap bottled wars

hanging on by your teeth

SLEEPING BEAUTY

delicate & bruised
& laid out like paper -
open & defenceless
beyond all knowledge
of this hostile enchantment

& powerless to wake
or move
yet moving further
& further away
from what matters ...

EVERY GO[OD] BOY DESERVES FUDGE

dispossessed
your husband stays
in his room
without shame
without honour
counting the hours
the days
the labours
while november grows
more insistent
chilling

& there he eats
in the purgatory
of his seventy-two years

& he cannot leave
& he has no choice
but to deny

SURRENDER

In Her Own Words

*... never scold your daughters
daughters are like sparrows*

our daughter bends her
long leanness over me
& with harlequin gesture
unbinds the tension
the brittle binding

her tortoise-shell eyes
like twin green seas
locked in their sockets

her thin bird fingers
duck in & out
anoint my gaunt body

*feathers of blood
embers of sacrifice*

& you can almost see
what the antiseptic
won't wash away

& you wonder what
her hands did before

& perhaps you love her
a little more

THIS IS MY BODY

In Her Own Words

enough is enough

no more
high-voltage chemo
catscans
experimental drugs
herbal cures
show & tell sessions
megadose vitamins
almonds & carrot juice

no more
hallucinations
bad solutions
unjustified violations
illegible scriptures

no more the common spiel
of cause-effect & probability

enough coffee-ground vomit
gangrenous bile
burnt orifices

it's past negotiation
there are no grays

no one knows time
more intimately

& i want out

if only to die
knowing ...

THE PRIMAL SADNESS

it took them ten months
& four days
to hear your ragged scream

ten months
& four days

to give you
this one brief moment
of dignity

MEDICINE HUNT

monkshood
hemlock
nightshade

you dare me
to pick them

MOTHERTONGUE

In Her Own Words

i may have been made
of sugar & spice
but lately unlike
snow white or the
queen of hearts
i am the haunted hag
the wicked witch
cheated of the pyre
the rack

no bag of tricks
no hocus-pocus
no sleight-of-hand

no abracadabra have i

& unlike the fairytale
i have no throne
no dowry
no golden ball

i threw them all away ...

SO FAST LOSING LIGHT

just when i'd
reached an age
when you could
know me
& knowing
love me
& loving
touch me

it hurts to be
so small

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO DIE

In Her Own Words

there will be no bored mortician
no rose-windowed chapel
no satin-lined casket
cushioned with carnation moons

no cemetery of names will hold me
i want no black mantilla
no gossips with crumbling faces
& momentary tears

envelope me in petals of pansy
periwinkle & rose
& new shoots of yew

commit this confining husk
to open flame & soil
for earth's i am & fire
shall light my way

honour my passage
with dancing & feasting
laughter & song
for it is spring
first season of my dying

FINAL GIFT

all night long
watching the pale prison
of your body
give over

this new reality
this real unreal
too near for you to see

i am wide-eyed
& afraid & in a dark
that never saw the sun

huddled by your bed
pushing crushed ice
into your mouth of dust

your breath against my own

while grief roars up
through breast & bone
from the bottom of my belly
to root like stone

all night long
watching
waiting

because women always
help each other die
knowing the memory
will be important

EVEN IN THE MOON

curled like a fist
her gaunt face
grows indifferent
& so with you
old serpent moon

come the dawn
you too, shall be
born in another

AS I LEAVE YOU

In Her Own Words

he comes

his immediate fever
enters my dilated body
like some raging rapist

already these raw eyes
unreflective
unable to see my own
savage foreignness

colours have faded

a greasy potion oozes
from these frayed
flaws & fissures
as his jaw closes round me

each breath taking me deeper
& deeper ...

smells of blood
of earth ...

LAST RITES

one last time
you open
emaciated arms
let me in
to the mother
warm

you don't say
reaching out
is difficult

i don't say
it hurts to go on ...

WANDERING DAYS

i taste moonblood
hecate's tongue
inside mine

i see around us
the bruised earth
reseeding

& i walk
retreating into
solitude

every step
a prayer ...

LITTLE GIRL LOST

far above the dust & din
of ordinary traffic
& those places where
the others are
sipping their whiskey
& water

i am three, five & seven
here, in my safe place
[this room was yours]
rummaging broken drawers
& unlit wardrobes
for the warm you left behind

i am nine, eleven, thirteen
spinning in the full-length mirror
that turns young women into things

waiting for you to come home
sometimes fearful
sometimes furious

& now a starker age
of almost twenty-something
i am trying on your favourite
red stiletto heels

but already my feet too big

ASHES TIME

coward
because i can
not let go
brave because
i wait ...

[these animal emotions
are not through
with you]

THE LONG WAKE

step
by
step
father's
slipperd
feet
fall
down
the
hall
way
to
this
moment
when
his
blue
heart
opens
hears
itself
drop
to
this
moment
when
we
can
no
longer
avoid
each
other
when
we
have
to
begin ...

OMEGA

your eyes
thigh
familial rib
your lips
hips
soft belly
your womb
i will plant deep
& tell earth
my strength was
not courage
- was love

& after

the seven seas
will rise

wash it all away ...

HOPE CHEST

i turn the key
force open the lid
as one lays open a ribcage
feeling the wounded heart
in every direction

i lay open the lid
& mingled with the scent
of sacred cedar
find smudged baby shoes
handknit sweaters
& two patchwork rabbits
whose loose flesh lie
cupped around scraps
of working-class poverties
& early motherhood

when you possessed me best

SNAPSHOTS

I

my eye slices across
a rare prairie orchid
in dusty barefeet
& a worn handmedown dress
two sizes too large
stifled
obedient
perfectly polite
in her seventh year

ii

i step over a shoebox
of unknown black & whites
who somehow bear
a reflection of me
in their pioneer eyes -

these too
are desperate days

iii

they forced you
to pose with them
- you're the dying one
cradling my infant son
with his smile of summer
& your eyes of regret

*there will be children to teach
us what we can't teach ourselves*

YOU NEVER KNEW

sacrificial love

what i know about gods

my deepest ecstasies
jealousies & anxieties

you never knew

about unicorns
& this wilderness
i play in

the perceptions
dreams
magic & mysteries
inside my self

you named all things
i am

yet never knew

IN THE NAME OF THE MOTHER

resurrected from her
uterine world
ever-green persephone
pours her blessings

& when no one is looking
dips her brush
scratches a tiny sun
tiny talisman
- like the one
you lost last winter –
into the spring sky

& when no one is listening
she speaks the true names:

la va ya ra ma

saying it all
saying nothing
she speaks the true names:

la va ya ra ma

earth
water
air
fire
mother

yours & mine

THE AWAKENING

you re-emerge
in sage leaves
sun spun petals
bluebellied clouds

daybreak star

your voice
sombre & solacing
in shells of wind
fists of thunder

your fragrance
abundant in the
first wet rose
thin-winged orchid

sandalwood

your touch
endless in sea mist
iron horns of rain
willow-bark ribs

wings of the eagle

runes that warm
my womanbones

BACK IN BLACK

i come to some familiar place
to work the old wisdom -
heal myself

i come to learn this skin
& write of things that
used to be locked up
hidden

those forbidden things
within & without me
with all their imperfections

& perhaps i love you
a little more

